 TURNER, Adm

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Freedom Depends on Snoops

U.S. Intelligence Community Must Keep Us Aware of the Dangers Around Us

BY STANSFIELD TURNER

A terrorist organization plans to kidnap an American businessman; a Soviet delegation changes its negotiating goals; a ship carrying illegal narcotics enters U.S. coastal waters. Elements of a LeCarre novel? No. Real life? Yes. Worth knowing? That's up to you.

The American intelligence community has been the eyes and ears of the United States overseas for over 30 years. Simple rationale: It is better to know what is happening around us than to be surprised. While originally a reaction to Pearl Harbor, that rationale is even more relevant today. Military parity, economic interdependence and political activism are today's realities. Freedom, sometimes survival, depends on awareness. Governments, no less than individuals, can do a better job if they can anticipate problems and are able to plan ahead. This is neither illegal nor sinister. All nations work hard at being better informed. Unfortunately, in recent years this has become harder for us and easier for our competitors.

The United States is an open society. Foreigners can move freely and unnoticed in our midst. The quantities of published information about everything that we do exceeds any individual's capacity to absorb it. The KGB's job is easy.

The CIA's job—collecting information about other countries as well as international activities—is a little more difficult. Terrorists and drug traffickers do not advertise. Many countries whose actions affect us directly are closed. There is no opportunity to learn about them openly. Travel is prohibited, their press is controlled, their governments function in secret, and foreign initiatives are often taken without explanation. Surprise is a routine strategy.

Although we are at a disadvantage in this quest for information, none of us would trade this openness for the short-term advantages of unnecessary secrecy. Nonetheless, if we are to function successfully in a world where closed societies compete with us economically, politically and militarily, where our well-being is in some measure dependent on their actions and our ability to anticipate them, we too must preserve some secrets lest we lose all leverage.

The intelligence community in particular is out of business unless it can ensure a large degree of confidentiality in what it does. The Russian who passes his delegation's change in negotiating strategy to us, the agent who can become a member of a terrorist organization and thereafter keep us informed of its plans, the allied intelligence agencies that work with us to watch and thwart international drug trafficking—none will take the obvious risks if we cannot guarantee their anonymity. With the organized effort under way today to uncover American intelligence officers and activities—in the real or feigned belief that this will benefit the United States—the ability to protect these intelligence sources and methods is in danger.

Is the threat to America of terrorism and lawlessness real? Is there a danger that the United States could in time lose its position of leadership in the world, and maybe some degree of its free choice? Is it worthwhile to pursue hard-to-get information so that decision-makers can know what other countries actually plan rather than guessing what they might be planning? The decision is really up to the American citizen. But, if your answer to any of those questions is yes, then some individual or group, call it the CIA or call it whatever you will, must go dig out the information.

Adm. Stansfield Turner is the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Anti-intelligence protagonists will claim *ipse dixit*—that, while these examples may seem reasonable, the intelligence community, and the CIA in particular, is involved also in skulduggery of a less savory nature. As proof, a litany of past abuses—some actual, many imagined—is recited.

There is no question that intelligence capabilities were misused in the past, albeit very infrequently. There is also no question that the abuses that did occur were thoroughly investigated by the Church committee, the Rockefeller commission and others, and do not continue to exist. Anyone who is more than superficially informed on intelligence matters, and who is willing to be honest, knows that the CIA is operating more openly and is under tighter controls today than at any time in its history.

And, while secrecy remains indispensable to serious intelligence work, the several new oversight bodies, acting as surrogates for the general public, are not denied any information that they need to ensure that what the CIA does is both legal and proper. The executive and legislative branches share this responsibility through the personal involvement of the President and the Vice President, the National Security Council, the new Intelligence Oversight Board and the two new, in the past two years, Select Committees on Intelligence in the House and Senate.

Secrecy, while it can be used to hide mi deeds and mistakes, can also enable us to lea more about those who could harm us, der them the advantage of surprise, and ensu that our decisions are based on fact rath than surmise. In itself, secrecy is neither go nor bad, moral nor immoral. In the nc oversight bodies we have a responsive, wel conceived mechanism capable for perhaps t first time of controlling government secre and secret activities adequately. I suggest th we give it a chance.